

Group Jigsaws: External Initiatives and Personal Initiative

Creating support systems, even with actionable solutions that adults recommend, is far from easy; “if it were easy,” a conference participant told the first author bluntly following a CAPE presentation, “it would have been done by now.” The fact that adults recommended solutions requiring external initiatives *and* personal initiative makes it clear that a single solution, or even one type of solution, will not adequately address challenges adults face to walking through the adult education center door.

Solutions requiring external initiatives

Instructions: In groups of 5, decide who will take the role of person A through E. First Person A communicates the information in textbox A, then asks the questions below the textbox to their group. Then repeat the same process with Person B, C, D, and E.

A. Interviewees were generally aware external initiatives existed but often did not fully understand them or know how to access them. One interviewee remarked vaguely, “The government should be doing stuff to support” adult education. Another suggested finding “some type of service to help.” Peer advocates and volunteers help navigate people through a support system. “People who went through the same thing you did, and they can advocate for you to deal with the system.”

Questions:

1. Whose responsibility *is* it to provide support systems for new or continuing adult learners?
2. How does your group respond to the remark about “the government should...”?

B. Other external initiatives seemed clearer to adult interviewees. Adults recommended transportation assistance, such as bus passes, and scholarships to cover testing fees. A woman recommending bus passes did so conditionally. “It would have to be in the contract [for the bus pass]. They have to sign off that this is what they are going to do with it... that you are actually going to the school. You can go wherever you want afterwards but trying to make sure you are on the right path.”

Questions:

1. How does your group respond to the idea of a conditional bus pass? Which of your partners could help your adult learners with transportation challenges?
2. Does your program offer scholarships for testing fees? If so, where do the funds come from and how does it work?

C. Support also means helping an adult get time to study by watching the adult's children. Some interviewees advised adults to work with family and friends to get childcare. If that is not possible, it may mean relocating closer to extended family who can provide childcare. "You have someone there that is on your side, that is willing to help you babysit," explained a woman. Others recommended childcare within adult education for parents. A woman relayed how her cousin told her that a local community college offered childcare for students, which allowed the cousin to participate in adult education.

Questions:

1. How is offering childcare beneficial to prospective adult learners?
2. With whom could your program partner to offer childcare?

D. Other recommendations involved tutoring, whether in a group or individually. A woman described how "one-on-one help is awesome. You get the face-to-face and it's like me and you, but working in a group is a lot better, too, because you get to know other people and see their struggles. And then if it is the same thing you are struggling with and they got a different way of doing things, you all can share your different ideas and maybe that way will be better for you. I feel like working in a group is really cool." Several adults talked about needing math tutoring. They said they "would have failed" without tutoring.

Questions:

1. What could be the benefits to your adult learners of forming small groups for tutoring?
2. Would your program need to partner to offer tutoring – if so, with whom?
3. Why might interviewees have singled out math as a topic for tutoring? Would your adult learners agree or disagree?

E. Support groups for emotional and mental health issues were a last recommended type of external initiative. Support means providing encouragement, as a female interviewee explained, "Someone to be there to say, 'Good job!' and encourage you." Another woman recommended having mentors to explain why a person needs to do things and to help the student hang in there. "You can encourage somebody. Yeah, encouragement... You can believe in somebody, that they can do it. And you know that they can do it when they make it all the way." In a separate group, a woman remarked, "You don't give them confidence, you help them learn, so they can get more confidence. Help them make their own decisions." Having emotional and mental health support might involve group therapy, where "some people might have more ideas" to solve problems than a single individual would. Another woman observed, "It feels good to know that you have somebody in your life or in your corner to root you on every step of the way. That would definitely help me get through life a whole lot easier."

Questions:

1. What differences, if any, do you see between a support group that offers encouragement to struggling learners and a support group that provides mental health therapy?
2. How might you need to partner to form a support group for emotional and/or mental health issues for your program?

Solutions requiring personal initiative

Instructions: In your group, communicate the information in one of the textboxes as assigned. Then decide on a scribe/artist from your group. Have the scribe/artist draw or write a representation of your group's understanding of interviewee recommendations in that textbox. You can use a wallchart. Be prepared to share the group's "picture" with peers.

A. Making Connections. An interviewee stated that if she had a support system, she "could go to" education. Doing so would mean finding a network of personal connections. A first type of personal initiative, an interviewee group advised, is making connections - that is, making friends if there is no family support for the participant to start adult education. "Talk to people around you," suggested one. A second interviewee added, "It's not what you know but who you know." Another agreed, "You need to know somebody." The "somebody" providing support could be "a new group of friends" - or a godmother, grandmother, cousins, or aunts outside the inner circle of nuclear family. A man added, "We gotta be strong for ourself. Don't worry about what the family got going on." These adults advised not worrying about lack of family support and relying more on support from friends or others who understand the circumstances.

B. Surrounded by Positive People. Developing a new support system can help adults gain confidence and persistence. A woman observed, "If I have good people that surround me, that's doing things that I want to do [in learning], that I am aiming for." She added, "And once you get that confidence from that person who really care for you, you work on it. You work toward it, you receive it." A man said, "Keeping the people that I associate with and keeping people around me that just want to learn. The people that I be around, that come around me." A man stated about persistence, "Sometimes people get stuck. It is like you are in quicksand, you get disgusted." He advised people to "stay aggressive" and don't give up. He said, "Pride can be a good thing, or it can hurt you." He advised adults to "back up and let it go by", not to have "too much pride" and allow people to help, even "when you don't want to ask for help". It means identifying the "right people" to get help from, rather than getting help from manipulative people who would somehow take advantage or be toxic.

C. Recognizing Inspirational Peers. Friends, whether new or longtime, can motivate adults and help them move forward. Friends can also be an inspiration. Two women advised adults to find inspirational peers. One talked admiringly about a friend who got a GED credential so she could continue toward a degree. Her friend told her, "You know, we can do it together..." She admitted feeling inspired toward education by her friend's example.

D. Finding Support Through Faith. A second type of personal initiative involves faith and spirituality. As described in RQ2 findings, some adults saw church as a reliable support system or even as family. A woman “takes her problems” to God and relies on spiritual support to get by. Another woman relies on a “church home” which helps her feel closer to God. She joins with fellow parishioners “like a family.” In her “church home,” she added, “we all help one another”, and “we are just one family joined with God.” One group asked, “How much faith and determination does a person have?” At the homeless missions, stated a woman, everyone is different. “I still pray and keep my faith every day,” she said. “You gotta be kind of humble” about people, life, and time. “On the streets it is real,” emphasized another formerly homeless adult. “You can’t let people get to you.”

E. Exchanging Support. A final type of personal initiative is participating in support exchanges. Adults advise finding other committed, goal-oriented people. “You apply yourself and when you are pushing, you’re going to want somebody’s help.” Another adult in the same group responded, “Both give and receive.” The group talked about helping out where they could. A man added, “Care about others.” In another group, a woman said, “My grandmother used to tell us, ‘Kindness is free. That’s one of the things we can give to another person.’ Some of the things we are so worried about is what we are giving to somebody and how it is going to benefit us. But... by helping you it is going to help all of us.” In a separate group, a man advocated for supporting each other – that people see that positive support and it supports them. “That has to come from within. You gotta love someone... [in return] somebody can speak up for” you. Adults recommended helping each other by sharing certain complementary skills. “It’s all about helping one other.”